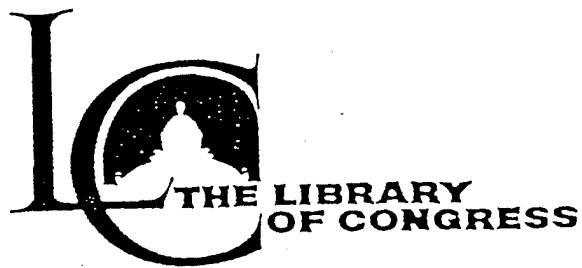


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## **A DECADE OF CHINESE-NORTH KOREAN RELATIONS: "COMRADES-IN-ARMS FOREVER"?**

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Author: Beth Green

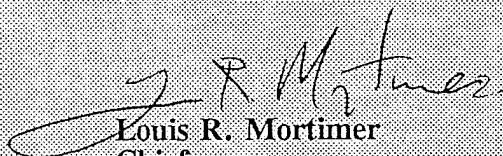
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## PREFACE

This study provides background information on Chinese-North Korean relations since the mid-1970s, with emphasis on military relations. Attention is given to identifying the circumstances and forces that are likely to be most important in determining the course of Sino-North Korean relations for the remainder of the 1980s. Information is based on unclassified sources. Some comparisons with Soviet-North Korean relations also are offered.

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## SUMMARY

The relationship between China and North Korea is one of the most crucial links in East Asian security. For most of its history since the Korean War, Pyongyang has maintained a semblance of balance between its two neighbors, China and the Soviet Union, although, overall, North Korea has been slightly closer to China. Since 1983, North Korea has "tilted" fairly sharply toward the Soviet Union, with improvements in their military relationship particularly notable. This shift raises an important question: is the tilt temporary and will Pyongyang once again move closer to Beijing, or does it signal a qualitative change in North Korean foreign policy and a reduced emphasis on Kim Il-song's chuche philosophy of self-reliance? Factors affecting Sino-North Korean relations include:

- o interrelations between and among China, North Korea, the United States, Japan, and the Soviet Union, especially US-China relations, Sino-Japanese relations, and Sino-Soviet normalization;
- o military and economic competition between North and South Korea;
- o the North Korean domestic situation, especially economic problems and the issue of the succession to Kim Il-song;
- o Chinese and Soviet policies toward South Korea; and
- o United States-South Korean relations, especially military ties.

As of the mid-1980s, several of the key factors mentioned above have caused Chinese and North Korean interests to diverge. Particularly vexing to Pyongyang are (1) China's closer ties with North Korea's two greatest "enemies," the United States and Japan; (2) Beijing's improved relations with Seoul; and (3) Chinese domestic reforms that deviate from orthodox Communist ideology. In addition, closer US-South Korean cooperation and upgraded arms sales since the beginning of the 1980s have heightened Pyongyang's desire for more advanced military equipment, a service which China is unable to provide. Therefore North Korea has drawn closer to the Soviet Union, and has received MiG-23/FLOGGERS which Moscow had previously withheld. In return, the Soviet Union has received overflight rights for reconnaissance flights and a still unknown degree of access to North Korean ports.

Whether this change in North Korean policy will be long-lasting will become apparent in the next few years through such indicators as the following: the extent of port and airspace access Pyongyang grants Moscow; whether North Korea becomes more closely integrated into Soviet-sponsored economic and political organizations; and whether Soviet-North Korean military cooperation expands to include joint exercises or deliveries of more advanced equipment. If the Korean leadership has not returned to a more independent course between China and the Soviet Union by the end of the 1980s, chuche may have been overshadowed by "proletarian internationalism."

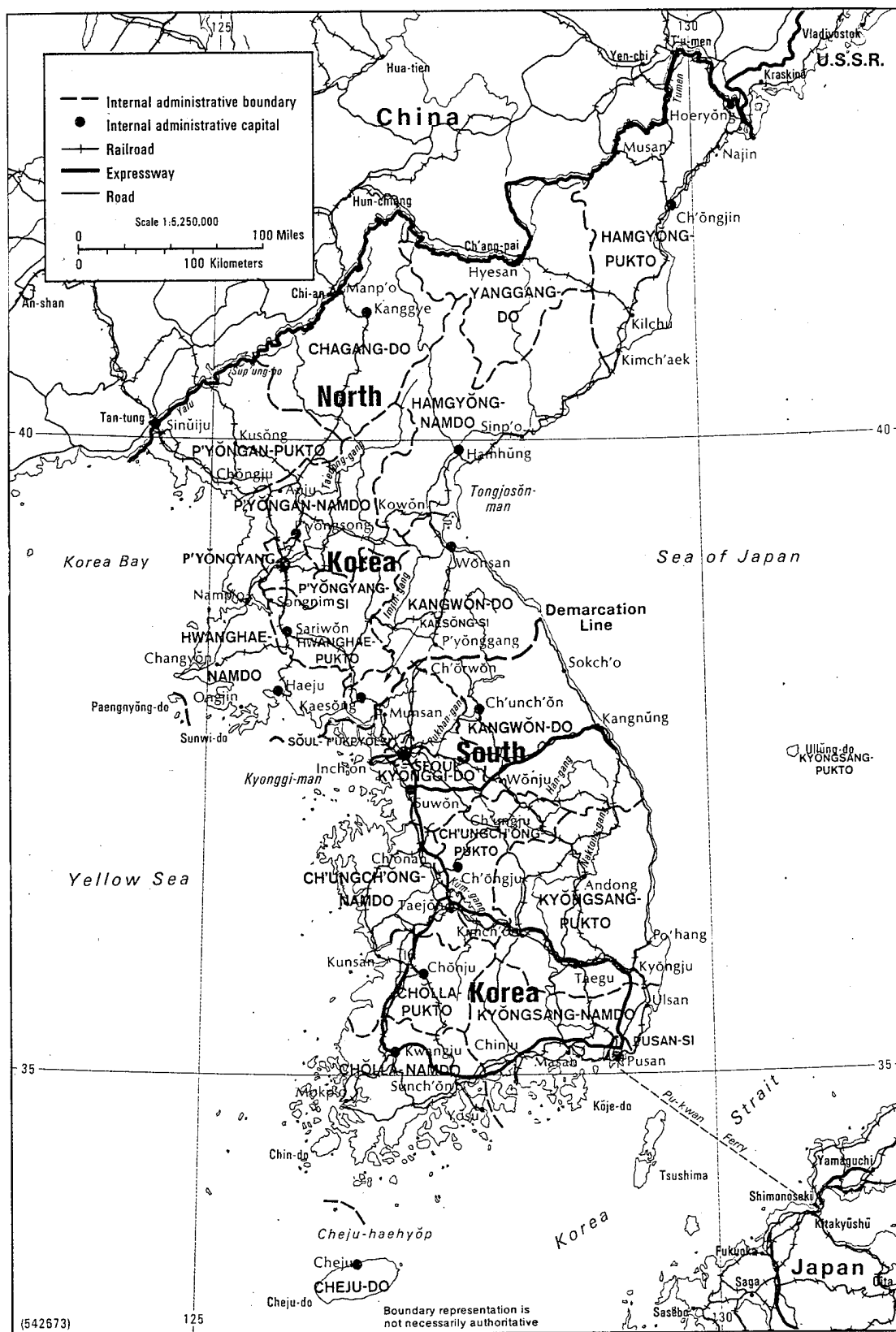


Figure 1. The Korean Peninsula

# 1. FACTORS IN CHINESE-NORTH KOREAN RELATIONS: AN OVERVIEW

The relationship between China and North Korea (the Democratic People's Republic of Korea) is one of the most crucial links in East Asian security. Geographical proximity has made the Korean Peninsula important to China's security since traditional times. The three wars involving Korea in the past century (the Sino-Japanese War, 1894-95, the Russo-Japanese War, 1904-05, and the Korean War, 1950-53) affected China profoundly. China's treaty commitment with North Korea, signed in 1961 a few days after an almost identical treaty between Pyongyang and Moscow, is Beijing's only formal foreign military alliance. The treaty and China's underlying security concerns dictate that China undoubtedly would be drawn into any future large-scale conflict on the Korean Peninsula. Such a conflict would have adverse consequences for China, since it would almost certainly disrupt United States-Chinese relations and would increase Pyongyang's need for advanced Soviet weaponry, which China is unable to provide.

Korea plays a role in China's greatest security concern: fear of Soviet encirclement of China. Despite recent efforts toward Sino-Soviet rapprochement, China continues to view the Soviet Union as its primary military threat. Given Soviet predominance among China's neighbors--Mongolia, Afghanistan, Laos, Vietnam, and to a lesser degree India--a distinctly pro-Soviet North Korea would make Soviet encirclement of China almost complete. Perhaps Beijing's worst fear concerning Korea is a repetition of the outcome in Vietnam. According to this scenario, a future unified Korean regime would decide to establish allegiance with the Soviet Union despite years of Chinese friendship and support. Accordingly, China's primary interests with regard to North Korea are:

- o to help maintain stability on the Korean Peninsula and prevent the eruption of hostilities, and
- o to preclude the emergence of an exclusively pro-Soviet orientation among the Korean leadership.

For its part, Pyongyang's security interests are:

- o to maintain military superiority over or a military balance with South Korea (the Republic of Korea) which is backed by the United States forces on the Korean Peninsula,
- o to prevent a resurgence of Japanese military power that could threaten Korea (giving rise to the bitter Korean memory of Japanese occupation, 1910-45), and
- o above all, to achieve the eventual reunification of Korea on favorable terms.

For most of the time since the Korean War, North Korea has considered its interests best served by maintaining a semblance of balance in its relations with its two large neighbors, China and the Soviet Union. Pyongyang's position between Moscow and Beijing has fallen short of true equidistance, and, overall, North Korea has leaned slightly in China's direction during most



of the past 3 decades. Two exceptions to the policy of balance were evident in the 1960s. During 1962-64, following the Sino-Soviet split and the Cuban missile crisis, North Korea expressed firm solidarity with China and was openly critical of the Soviet Union. In the late 1960s during the Cultural Revolution in China, the Red Guards' portrayal of Kim Il-song as a "fat revisionist" was preceded and accompanied by increased Soviet military aid to North Korea and pushed Pyongyang in Moscow's direction. The debacle of the Cultural Revolution and the attendant criticism of the North Korean leadership was the most glaring "black mark" on the historical legacy of Chinese-North Korean relations. On the other hand, the Chinese have the distinction of being the force that saved North Korea from annihilation during the Korean War, creating a "friendship cemented in blood," as both China and Korea have often stated. Others factors consolidating Sino-Korean friendship over the past 3½ decades, to Moscow's disadvantage, have been:

- a long-standing historical association and related cultural affinity;
- shared stages of both revolutionary development and economic development;
- shared opposition to the United States as the "number one enemy" that obstructs the unification of both Korea and China;
- common disapproval of the Soviet policy in the 1960s of peaceful coexistence with the West in general and the United States in particular;
- similar "cults of personality" surrounding Mao Zedong and Kim Il-song;
- other similarities or borrowings in communist ideology, such as mass mobilization techniques (for example, the Chollima Movement, which was patterned after the Great Leap Forward in China); and
- Kim Il-song's early experiences in China and fluency in the Chinese language.

Given the multitude of factors drawing China and North Korea together, what has been the countervailing force motivating Pyongyang to strike a balance between China and the Soviet Union and at times pushing Pyongyang to "tilt" toward Moscow? The answer appears to be at least three-fold:

- the need for military assistance, especially hardware, which China was unable to provide because it lacked the technological capability;
- the need for economic assistance at levels China could not meet; and,
- more abstractly, Pyongyang's desire to remain independent.

The penchant for independence that Kim Il-song has displayed during most of his rule of North Korea very likely has stemmed both from his desire to "play China and the Soviet Union off against each other" so that Pyongyang can derive maximum benefit from both of them, as well as from the deep-seated need of Korean nationalism to achieve political independence after a long history

of domination by foreign powers. Another factor making this independent stance possible has been the willingness of China and the Soviet Union, for most of the past 3 decades, to take part in the interaction. Neither Beijing nor Moscow has been willing to "give up on" Pyongyang, and both instead have competed for influence there. Thus far, neither China nor the Soviet Union has been successful in winning total allegiance as the reward for whatever assistance it offered North Korea, although Moscow may have tried making such demands in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

Since the early 1980s, Pyongyang's stance, originally positioned slightly closer to China than to the Soviet Union, has shifted. Evidence of the shift has been an increase in Soviet military assistance to North Korea, greater numbers and higher levels of Soviet-Korean exchanges, and even remarkable changes in rhetoric favoring the Soviet Union. The change poses an important question: Is North Korea's "tilt" toward Moscow part of Kim Il-song's strategy of maintaining maneuverability in the long run or does it represent the beginning of a qualitative change in North Korean foreign and strategic policies? In other words, will the North Korean shift toward the Soviet Union be long-lasting or is it part of a zigzag pattern that will rebound toward China once again in the next few years or sooner?

Many factors undoubtedly have a bearing on this crucial element of Northeast Asian security--Pyongyang's position between Beijing and Moscow. Although an in-depth discussion of all of these factors is beyond the scope of this paper, the following list indicates the complexity of these relationships:

- interrelations between and among China, North Korea, the United States, Japan, and the Soviet Union, especially US-China and Sino-Japanese relations, as well as Sino-Soviet normalization;
- military and economic competition and the degree of tension between North and South Korea and, relatedly, the status of reunification proposals;
- Chinese domestic policies and underlying ideology and world view;
- the North Korean domestic situation, both economically and politically, especially potential difficulties in the succession to leadership of Kim Il-song's son, Kim Chong-il;
- the policies of both China and the Soviet Union toward South Korea; and
- United States-South Korean relations, in particular, the United States' military commitment to Seoul, expressed through joint exercises and arms sales.

## 2. TRENDS OVER TIME: A REVIEW OF CHINESE-NORTH KOREAN RELATIONS

### a. Down and Back up From the Nadir, Mid-1960s to 1975

The domestic chaos of the Cultural Revolution disrupted China's

relations with almost all countries, and North Korea was no exception. Relations between China and North Korea sank to their lowest point in the second half of the 1960s through a confluence of factors, particularly the Cultural Revolution and corresponding improvements in Soviet-North Korean relations. In 1964 the change in Soviet leadership from Nikita Khrushchev (disliked by North Korea) to Leonid Brezhnev led to a renewed relationship between Moscow and Pyongyang. Soviet-North Korean relations also received a boost from North Korea's backing for increased Soviet bloc support for North Vietnam in 1965. The relationship was further enhanced when Japan established diplomatic relations with South Korea in 1965, causing Japanese relations with North Korea to deteriorate and increasing Pyongyang's economic reliance on the Soviet Union. Soviet military aid to North Korea was then resumed, and Pyongyang received much-needed jet fuel and spare parts, as well as additional military jets, medium tanks, WHISKEY Class submarines, KOMAR Class guided missile ships, motor torpedo boats, coastal radar, and shore-to-ship missiles.<sup>1</sup> During the ideological frenzy of the Cultural Revolution, the Red Guards labeled their former "comrade-in-arms" Kim Il-song a "fat revisionist." Beijing also publicized its claim to a small strip of North Korean territory on the Sino-Korean border, supposedly in return for Chinese assistance in the Korean War. Even at their most strained, Chinese-North Korean relations were not completely broken off, however. Rather Pyongyang emphasized its independent position based on Kim Il-song's chuche philosophy of self-reliance.

In 1969, North Korea and China began renewing ties, an event perhaps precipitated by Pyongyang's sensing it had shifted too close to Moscow and by Beijing's attempt to re-establish stable foreign relations after the Cultural Revolution. A strong impetus behind this warming trend was China and North Korea's shared fear of Japan, rekindled by events in US-Japanese relations. United States' policies under President Richard Nixon, enunciated in 1969 and 1970, gave Japan a greater role in Asian security and created an ominous (to Pyongyang) link between the defense of South Korea and Japan. In 1969, for the first time since 1965, a North Korean delegation attended China's national anniversary celebrations. In 1970, Premier Zhou Enlai became the first high-level Chinese visitor to Pyongyang since 1963, and the two sides again referred to their "blood-cemented militant friendship" that was "as close as lips and teeth." Later in the year, China reportedly dropped its claim to North Korean territory,<sup>2</sup> although the claim has been mentioned occasionally since then. In August 1971, a North Korean military delegation led by Chief of the General Staff O Chin-u visited Beijing and signed the first Chinese-Korean military aid agreement in more than 15 years. Although details of the agreement were not publicized, it may have had the purpose of reassuring North Korea of China's assistance after the surprising announcement in July that US President Nixon would visit China.

In keeping with Pyongyang's desire for independence, a Soviet military delegation was invited to visit North Korea immediately after Zhou Enlai's visit in the spring of 1970. Thus, North Korea received economic and military assistance from both China and the Soviet Union, and by 1975, China's share had increased so that the two were roughly equal.<sup>3</sup> Beijing provided Pyongyang with Chinese-made fighter planes, T54 and T55 tanks, warships including ROMEO Class submarines and destroyers, torpedoes, and airplane parts production facilities.<sup>4</sup> In the mid-1970s, Moscow provided Pyongyang with 81 aircraft,

including MiG-21/FISHBEDs, AN-2/COLTs, and AN-24/COKEs.<sup>5</sup> In addition, after 1974 when the North Korean economy began to show signs of trouble because of overspending in the early 1970s, China seemed more willing to help out, providing such assistance as an oil pipeline that helped decrease North Korea's reliance on Soviet oil.

In the first half of the 1970s, the two events that appeared most likely to disturb the closeness of Chinese-North Korean relations, namely US-Chinese rapprochement in 1971 and the normalization of Sino-Japanese relations in 1972, failed to have that effect. Although Pyongyang did seem to draw closer to Moscow around the time of President Nixon's visit to China, Chinese leaders apparently succeeded in reassuring Pyongyang, through aid and statements of support, that the new US-China relationship would have no unwanted effect on North Korea. A similar campaign of reassurance must have been undertaken in connection with the establishment of Sino-Japanese diplomatic relations. North Korea's reaction to Sino-Japanese ties may have been eased by the failure of Tokyo and Beijing to reach an agreement on a peace treaty at that time, an event which did not take place until 1978.

The renewal of Sino-North Korean ties in the first half of the 1970s culminated with Kim Il-song's visit to China in April 1975, his first since 1961. According to some reports, Kim wanted to visit Moscow as well as Beijing, but as an invitation was not forthcoming, instead he visited Eastern Europe. Kim Il-song received an elaborate and effusive welcome in China, and the joint communique signed by the two countries suggested a unanimity of views on almost all issues. At Kim's request, however, the joint communique did not include explicit statements of opposition to "hegemony," China's preferred term for Soviet expansionism.

There were numerous reports that during Kim Il-song's visit, Beijing rejected his plans to achieve the reunification of Korea by force. Kim's plans may have been inspired by the failure of peaceful reunification talks between the two Koreas (1972-74) as well as the imminent reunification of Vietnam (in late April 1975) following the 1973 withdrawal of US combat forces. In this context, China's position against a renewed Korean War, which would endanger Sino-US and Sino-Japanese entente and probably increase Pyongyang's need for Soviet military supplies, is not difficult to understand. Although circumstances point to a Chinese role in discouraging Kim from using force, the secrecy with which this issue is shrouded makes it difficult to be certain "whether or how much [Beijing] exerted a moderating influence over the impetuous Kim Il-song...."<sup>6</sup> The degree to which Beijing is capable of either restraining or encouraging North Korean domestic or foreign policy moves continues to be an important matter for speculation.

b. Approximate Equidistance, 1976-79

Throughout the second half of the 1970s, North Korea maintained a relative balance between China and the Soviet Union, with a slight slant in favor of Beijing. Moscow-Pyongyang relations did not improve for two reasons: North Korean debt repayment problems (which displeased Moscow) and the Soviet Union's somewhat softer attitude toward South Korea, demonstrated by academic and sports exchanges (which displeased Pyongyang). In addition, the Soviet Union did not express as much support for the North Korean reunification position as China did during that time.

Chinese-North Korean relations remained fairly stable from 1976-79 despite a myriad of potentially unsettling influences. Chinese leadership was in a state of flux after the deaths of Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai in 1976; South Korea began an intensive force improvement plan in 1976; US President Jimmy Carter in 1977 announced a plan gradually to withdraw US forces from Korea; and China signed a peace treaty with Japan in 1978 and normalized relations with United States in 1979. China's indirect trade with South Korea through Hong Kong also grew rapidly during the late 1970s, a trend that could not have gone unnoticed by Pyongyang. These events failed to cause substantial changes in Sino-Korean relations, at least in the short term.

Pyongyang appeared to steer a neutral course between Beijing and Moscow during 1976 and 1977, but the closeness of Sino-Korean relations became evident when Chairman and Premier Hua Guofeng visited North Korea in May 1978, his first trip abroad after coming to power (see Figure 2). The lavish reception he received even included a new song entitled "Ode to Chairman Hua." China and North Korea claimed to have reached "identical views"--President Kim denounced both "imperialism" and "dominationism," the latter term being apparently a North Korean version of China's anti-Soviet expression "hegemonism." Both China and North Korea declared their support for the reunification of Korea and insisted on the withdrawal of US forces and weapons from South Korea. Pyongyang specified that withdrawal was the first



Figure 2. Chairman Hua Guofeng visits Pyongyang in May 1978.  
(Source: Beijing Review, 12 May 1978, p. 6)

prerequisite for reunification, but China did not, a possible indication of Beijing's private reservations about the destabilizing effect of a total US pullout from the Korean Peninsula<sup>7</sup> and a suggestion that Pyongyang and Beijing had some differences of opinion behind their avowals of unanimity. Subsequently Vice Chairman and Vice Premier Deng Xiaoping followed up Hua's visit with a trip to North Korea in September 1978 on the 30th anniversary of the founding of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK).

In 1979, China seemed to make an effort to maintain close relations with North Korea, possibly to reassure Pyongyang in the face of impending improvements in China's relations with Pyongyang's "number one enemy," the United States. Pyongyang's need for reassurance was especially strong at this time, since the United States appeared to be reversing its previous decision to withdraw troops from South Korea and instead had begun large-scale annual military exercises with South Korea. Vice Chairman of the National People's Congress Standing Committee and Politburo member Deng Yingchao visited North Korea in spring 1979 for the unveiling of a statue of her late husband, Zhou Enlai. In 1979 Chinese statements demanding US withdrawal from South Korea became stronger and, once again, there was speculation that Beijing had restrained Kim Il-song from taking advantage of the disorder in South Korea following the assassination of President Park Chung Hee in October 1979.<sup>8</sup>

#### c. Minor Fluctuations, 1980-82

North Korea's relations with China and the Soviet Union fluctuated somewhat in the early 1980s. In 1980 and 1981, the Soviet Union showed an interest in improving Soviet-North Korean relations, evidenced by increased rhetorical support for Pyongyang. This coincided with a distancing in Sino-North Korean relations, a coolness no doubt related to the emerging de facto entente between China and two of the nations Pyongyang considers its greatest threats, Japan and the United States. An example of cooler Sino-Korean relations occurred in January 1981, when North Korean Premier Yi Chong-ok's visit to Beijing did not receive the customary Chinese media attention.

By late 1981 and 1982, as Beijing's call for an "anti-hegemony united front" gave way to what it termed an "independent foreign policy," Chinese-North Korean relations again appeared on the upswing. The shift was marked by a series of high-level visits, which began with Premier Zhao Ziyang's trip to Pyongyang in December 1981. In April 1982, Deng Xiaoping and Hu Yaobang, China's two top leaders at the time, paid Kim Il-song the distinct honor of a visit on the occasion of his 70th birthday. For unknown reasons, the visit was not publicized until September of that year. The North Korean Vice Minister of the Armed Forces Pak Chung-guk visited China in June 1982; the visit was followed by Chinese Defense Minister Geng Biao's visit to North Korea, including the Demilitarized Zone, the same month. The cordiality continued with President Kim Il-song's visit to China in September, his first since the death of Mao (see Figure 3). Deng Xiaoping and Hu Yaobang personally escorted Kim on provincial tours of Sichuan and Shaanxi, respectively, providing further evidence of the special importance accorded the Chinese-North Korean relationship. Toasts made during Kim's visit seemed to signal Chinese acceptance of Kim's son Kim Chong-il as heir apparent, despite the feudalistic overtones of the arrangement, which could not have been palatable to the Chinese.



Figure 3. Chinese leaders Zhao Ziyang, Hu Yaobang, and Deng Xiaoping with Kim Il-song at Beijing Railway Station, September 1982.  
(Source: Beijing Review, 27 September 1982, p. 5)

A renewal of the Chinese-North Korean commitment was also found in the military sphere. In early 1982, Beijing reportedly provided Pyongyang with more than 20 F-7 fighter planes (an improved model of the MiG-21/FISHBED),<sup>9</sup> which may have been North Korea's first new aircraft in 10 years. Interestingly, statements by Chinese Defense Minister Geng Biao during his visit to North Korea were more critical of the United States than had been common in the past few years. Most likely the criticism reflected China's new "independent" foreign policy line. A number of Chinese statements referred to US activity in South Korea as "hegemonistic." Beijing also insisted that US troops in South Korea be withdrawn "immediately," rather than simply "eventually" or "as soon as possible," as had been demanded in the past.

The harsher anti-US position taken by China, which resulted in closer Sino-North Korean ties, probably was in response to increased US military assistance to South Korea, especially following President Chun Doo Hwan's visit to the United States in 1981. Seoul is due to receive at least 36 F-16s by the end of the 1980s, which will significantly upgrade South Korea's air capability. According to Korean scholar Young Whan Kihl, "many analysts," consider the Korean military balance to be in the North's favor. In 1985, in sheer numbers of military personnel (including North Korean security personnel), Pyongyang outnumbered Seoul with a total of 822,500 men to the South's 622,600.<sup>10</sup> "North Korea is said to possess a substantial advantage over the South in overall quantity of military equipment as a result of its intensive defense buildup during the 1970s."<sup>11</sup> However, Pyongyang is undoubtedly concerned about losing ground through US arms sales to the South as well as through Seoul's Second Force Improvement Plan (1982-87). Under this plan, South Korea is increasing military spending levels, improving

training, and expanding military purchases.<sup>12</sup> Pyongyang's concerns about averting an unfavorable military balance may be the most salient factor in its relations with China and the Soviet Union in the mid-1980s and in the foreseeable future.

d. Tilt or Sharp Turn?, 1983-86

From 1983-86, indications were that North Korea had shifted significantly away from China and closer to the Soviet Union. The strongest evidence of change from the previous "tilt" toward China was the dramatic increase in Soviet-North Korean military relations, including deliveries of advanced MiG-23/FLOGGER fighter planes, which Moscow previously had withheld from Pyongyang. Many observers maintain that the shift is likely to be a temporary move, and part of Kim Il-song's independent strategy of steering a neutral course between China and the Soviet Union. The central question posed by this new situation is whether North Korea now is willing to make a long-term commitment to closer ties to Moscow or whether the perennially-touted primacy of Sino-North Korean relations, "cemented in blood," will reassert itself.

The strains in Sino-North Korean relations were not immediately apparent in 1983, perhaps being overshadowed by a series of unexpected events in Northeast Asia having dramatic outcomes. The first event was the hijacking of a Chinese civil airliner to South Korea in May 1983, an occurrence which led to unprecedented direct negotiations between the governments of China and South Korea. Immediately after the negotiations, Chinese Minister of Foreign Affairs Wu Xueqian visited Pyongyang, no doubt to attempt to mollify North Korea's resentment. The June 1983 visit of heir apparent Kim Chong-il to China signalled that ties between China and North Korea had not deteriorated. The trip was kept secret at the time, but was revealed a month later. According to a Japanese press report, Kim Il-song may also have visited China secretly in August for a vacation.

In September 1983, the Soviet shooting down of Korean Airlines Flight 007 tragically demonstrated how close to the surface Northeast Asian security threats are. Among its other ramifications, the shooting diminished South Korean interest in continuing to improve relations with Moscow. Seoul's reaction may have helped to encourage Pyongyang to support Moscow's explanation of the incident, thus pushing the Soviet Union and North Korea slightly closer together.

The next unexpected and also tragic event affecting Sino-Korean relations was the bombing in October 1983 of the South Korean delegation in Rangoon, Burma, in which almost 20 South Korean government officials were killed. This bombing, actually an assassination attempt on President Chun Doo Hwan, seemed to have been masterminded by Pyongyang and brought about widespread international censure of North Korea. Moscow took this opportunity, close on the heels of KAL 007, to report only Pyongyang's version of the bombing. China took a more evenhanded approach publicly, and reported both Burmese and North Korean accounts of the bombing. Privately, however, China expressed displeasure over the incident. According to unconfirmed reports, Beijing and Pyongyang may have discussed the incident during another secret visit to China by Kim Il-song in November.<sup>13</sup> During his November visit



to Japan, then CCP General Secretary Hu Yaobang seemed indirectly critical of North Korea when he said that China had urged Pyongyang to avoid tension on the Korean peninsula.<sup>14</sup> The fact that the Rangoon bombing took place--especially if it had been planned by the highest levels of North Korean leadership--suggests that Beijing may have less control over North Korean behavior than is often believed.

Problems in Chinese-North Korean relations and Pyongyang's moves closer toward Moscow became more visible in 1984. Areas of emerging Sino-North Korean disagreement very likely included differing attitudes toward Korean reunification, developments in Sino-US relations and Sino-Japanese relations, and, above all, improvements in Soviet-North Korean relations. Signs of discord continued during all of the high-level exchanges with China in 1984, such as Korean Foreign Minister Kim Yong-nam's visit to China in February, Hu Yaobang's North Korean visit in May (after President Reagan's visit to China), Premier Kang Song-san's August trip to China, and another unannounced visit to China by Kim Il-song in late November. Pyongyang could not have been pleased with improved relations between Beijing and Washington, the "imperialist power" it sees as the primary obstruction to Korean reunification. China, for its part, apparently disapproved of Pyongyang's decision to call off path-breaking inter-Korean economic talks because of a shooting incident at Panmunjom in November.

Several statements by Chinese leaders in 1984 shed light on growing Sino-North Korean discord. In March, Hu Yaobang pledged Chinese support in the event of an invasion of North Korea. Later in the year, however, Chinese leaders reportedly told Japanese visitors that China would provide military assistance to North Korea only if Pyongyang were not responsible for starting the war.<sup>15</sup> In October, in a meeting with Japanese visitors, Deng Xiaoping stated explicitly for the first time that Beijing did "not necessarily agree with some policies made by North Korea."<sup>16</sup> China held back, however, from publicly criticizing improved Soviet-North Korean relations because of Beijing's own interest in improving Sino-Soviet relations. Public Chinese statements have even welcomed better Moscow-Pyongyang ties as conducive to stability in Northeast Asia.

Nevertheless, the strongest cause of strains in Sino-North Korean relations in 1984 was the improved status of Moscow-Pyongyang relations, evidenced by high-level visits and burgeoning military ties. In May 1984, President Kim Il-song visited the Soviet Union for the first time in 23 years. This was followed by Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Kapitsa's trip to North Korea in November, when a border agreement was signed. Although no formal economic or military agreements were made public, later evidence supports the contention that it was during these visits that the Soviet Union agreed to deliver between 40 to 50 MiG-23/FLOGGER fighter aircraft to North Korea,<sup>17</sup> after years of withholding such advanced models. Other items Moscow reportedly may have provided Pyongyang are T72 tanks, combat helicopters,<sup>18</sup> and SCUD missiles.<sup>19</sup> Another source claims, however, that Moscow has not provided Pyongyang with more modern tanks, which would upgrade North Korea's capability to invade the South.<sup>20</sup>

In 1985 and 1986, as Soviet-North Korean military relations continued to develop and the improvement began to extend into the political realm, the

decline in China-North Korean relations became more obvious by contrast. Notable Sino-North Korean exchanges were visits to China by Premier Kang Song-san and Foreign Minister Kim Yong-nam in spring 1985, a meeting between Hu Yaobang and Kim Il-song at the border town of Sinuiju in May, Vice Premier Li Peng's visit to North Korea in October 1985 for the 35th anniversary of the entry of China into the Korean War, and visits by Vice Premier Tian Jiyun, Beijing Military Region Commander Qin Jiwei, and President Li Xiannian to North Korea in July, August, and October 1986, respectively. According to reports appearing in Japan and South Korea in December 1986, President Li Xiannian may have proposed cross-recognition of North and South Korea during his visit, which Pyongyang refused. North Korea vehemently denied that China had made such a proposal, calling it "a barefaced lie and a pure fabrication."<sup>21</sup>

The fact that these key Chinese leaders visited North Korea during this period demonstrated the continued importance of Pyongyang to Beijing, but public statements and media treatment of the visits evidenced signs of strain in the relationship. Despite some formally correct statements, such as the claim of complete agreement during Kim and Hu's border town talks, exchanges during 1985 and 1986 seemed to be less significant in comparison with Soviet-North Korean interactions during the same period.

The contrast between Chinese and Soviet relations with North Korea was sharpest in the military field, and had political overtones. For example, the Soviet Union sent an air force squadron to North Korea in May 1985, First Deputy Chairman of the Council of Ministers Geydar Aliyev visited with a flotilla from the Soviet Pacific Fleet in August 1985, and Moscow and Pyongyang exchanged fighter squadrons and warships in July 1986.

The Soviet Union and North Korea have also abandoned their previous reticence on military and security issues and now have begun once again to link their security concerns explicitly in their rhetoric. For example, both the Soviet admiral and air force commanders who visited North Korea in July 1986 voiced readiness to enter into "joint operations" and to "rush forward and help the Korean comrades" if necessary. For its part, Pyongyang refers to the Soviet Union as an ally and liberator. Further proof of Pyongyang's decisive tilt toward Moscow was Kim Il-song's unusual trip to the Soviet Union by plane (despite Kim's well-known aversion to flying) in October 1986 (see Figure 4). This was followed by the visit to North Korea of Soviet General A.D. Lizichev, Chief of the Soviet Army and Navy Political Directorate, in December 1986.

An aspect of Soviet-North Korean military relations that has a direct bearing on China-North Korea ties is the question of what Moscow is receiving in return for increased assistance to Pyongyang. In 1985 it became apparent that North Korea had granted the Soviet Union overflight rights for reconnaissance along China's east coast. Although he did not mention North Korea by name, Hu Yaobang complained about extensive Soviet reconnaissance flights over China in June 1986.<sup>22</sup> Still another issue is the degree of access to North Korean ports Pyongyang has granted to Moscow, since this would have a major impact on Northeast Asian security arrangements and could be extremely disturbing to China. Soviet military ships have called at Wonsan and at least commercial vessels appear to have access to Najin, both located



Figure 4. Kim Il-song with CPSU General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev in the Kremlin, October 1986.  
(Source: Nodong Sinmun (Pyongyang), 25 October 1986, p. 2)

on Korea's east coast. In 1986, there were reports that the Soviet Union had received access to the west coast port of Nampo, which would put Soviet vessels less than 325 kilometers from China's important naval bases at Dalian and Qingdao.<sup>23</sup> According to some observers, Pyongyang is unlikely to provide Moscow with actual basing rights, since doing so would "undercut one of the basic positions [Kim] has taken in the nonaligned movement--that is, opposition to any foreign military bases or forces on the soil of another country, particularly U.S. forces in South Korea."<sup>24</sup> The extent to which Pyongyang offers Moscow access to North Korean ports and continued overflight rights will be both an indicator and a result of the degree of seriousness of North Korea's tilt toward the Soviet Union.

### 3. PROSPECTS

The preceding discussion of the factors affecting Northeast Asian security suggests that, by the mid-1980s, Chinese and North Korean interests were diverging in many areas:

- Pyongyang is likely to feel threatened by the recent signs of closer US-China and Sino-Japanese relations. The port call by US warships at Qingdao in November 1986 is a case in point; it undoubtedly increased North Korea's fears of an emerging security relationship between China, the United States, Japan, and South Korea.
- Military and economic competition between North and South Korea is intensifying, making the second half of the 1980s a critical period. In addition, South Korea is gaining in international stature, as evidenced by the 1988 Olympics scheduled for Seoul, adding to Pyongyang's discomfort.
- Recent Chinese policies of economic and political reform, which have included departures from previous Maoist ideology, very likely have troubled Pyongyang. Although North Korea passed a joint venture law in 1984--patterned after that of China--little has come of it. In 1985, Kim Il-sung seemed to criticize China indirectly when he said the North Korean economy would not become "subjugated" by foreign capital.
- Although the succession of Kim Chong-il to his father's position appears fairly well accepted, it is unknown whether the succession will entail a shift in North Korea's foreign policy.
- Beijing's contacts and trade with Seoul show no sign of abating after such moves as China's participation in the 1986 Asian Games. Many observers see North Korea's resentment of Chinese-South Korean ties as one of the primary motivations behind Pyongyang's present tilt toward Moscow.
- Pyongyang's perception of threat is undoubtedly increased by closer US-South Korean cooperation since 1976 and particularly in recent years. Annual joint exercises, the sale of advanced aircraft, and the impending introduction of Lance missiles to South Korea are likely to increase North Korean interest in more advanced hardware, which only Moscow can provide.

US-Chinese and Sino-Japanese relations, competition between North and South Korea, Chinese domestic policies, the succession to Kim Il-song, Chinese-South Korean ties, and US-South Korean relations--all of these factors will continue to shape Chinese-North Korean relations. Many observers of the Korean peninsula have agreed that a "legacy of suspicion" exists between North Korea and the Soviet Union. Kim Il-song has "jealously guarded his independence from Moscow ever since he broke loose from Soviet control during the Korean War."<sup>25</sup> Based on Kim's reckless actions in the past, the Soviet Union must also be wary of North Korea and unsure of how predictable an ally it is. On the other hand, Chinese-North Korean ties are usually described as resting on firm historical and cultural foundations: "Less tangible, but very real, are deep ties of history and even race which link China and North Korea, . . . . When the chips are down, Kim is an Asian--and proud of it."<sup>26</sup> And, "China has tried to compensate for its disadvantage in material resources by being more generous than the Soviet Union in symbolic support."<sup>27</sup> The development of Sino-North Korean relations during the rest of the 1980s is likely to demonstrate whether these assumptions are still correct.

The overriding question is whether Pyongyang will shift back and forth as it has in the past, ultimately restoring an independent position between China and North Korea, or whether North Korea's need for Soviet military and economic assistance will make it willing to be drawn into a closer long-term relationship with the Soviet Union. Important indicators of Soviet-North Korean relations include:

(1) the extent of port and airspace access North Korea grants the Soviet Union;

(2) whether North Korea moves closer to formally joining the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (CEMA or COMECON);

(3) evidence of the integration of North Korea into what Moscow refers to as the "international communist movement." For example, it will be significant if the Korean Workers' Party attends the conference of Asian communist and workers' parties to be held in Mongolia in summer 1987;

(4) whether the October 1986 visit of Kim Il-song to the Soviet Union and the subsequent Soviet military delegation to North Korea in December 1986 will yield tangible increases in Soviet-North Korean military cooperation, such as additional deliveries of equipment or more explicit military coordination. On this point, it seems unlikely Moscow will provide Kim Il-song with much more advanced aircraft (such as the MiG-29/FULCRUMs which India recently received), especially because of his history of unpredictability.

Judging from this review of Sino-North Korea relations over the past decade and more, it seems that if Kim Il-song remains on the scene and if the Korean philosophy of chuche remains vital to North Korean foreign policy, Pyongyang will find it necessary to retreat from closer ties to Moscow and steer a more neutral course within the next few years. However, if North Korea perceives its need for advanced Soviet military equipment and Soviet

economic assistance as crucial enough, and if Pyongyang finds Beijing foreign and domestic policies distasteful enough, North Korea may shift closer to the Soviet Union on a long-term basis. In practice chuche may become overshadowed by "proletarian internationalism." If Pyongyang continues to pursue closer and more substantive relations with Moscow, with a Gorbachev visit in 1987, increased port access for Soviet military ships, expanded North Korean participation in Soviet-sponsored economic and political organizations, and possibly closer military cooperation such as joint exercises by the end of the 1980s, Moscow may have eclipsed Beijing as Pyongyang's "close comrade-in-arms forever."

# ENDNOTES

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<sup>4</sup>Chung, p. 145.

<sup>5</sup>Zagoria, p. 1111.

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<sup>18</sup>Korea Herald (Seoul), 5 December 1984, n.p.

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